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ABSTRACT

A study surveyed newspapers that print religious news to determine the kinds of coverage their religion journalists provide and to determine the type of audience for which they write. Mail surveys were completed by 141 daily newspapers with circulations ranging from under 10,000 to over 100,000. All but 13 respondents provided a working definition of the kinds of stories considered religion news. The most common description emphasized religious organizations as sources of news or as the institutions most affected by the news. Approximately one-fourth of respondents said that there are few appropriate stories available to them, but 83% indicated that they try to provide a particular mixture of stories. The preferred mixtures emphasized religious, content, and geographic diversity as well as a varied writing style (news and features). Respondents also preferred stories appealing to all readers rather than to just one particular group. Data indicated that little has changed in religion news coverage--the emphasis remains on local people, congregations, and events. Results also suggested that larger papers were more likely to provide stories about issues, trends, and doctrine, and to review movies, books, music, and art shows with religious themes. Both the larger and the smaller newspapers recognized that people read religion news as a leisure-time activity and also as part of an attempt to understand the world. (AEW)

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Religion Journalists' Perceptions of Religion News and Its Audience

by

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Religion Journalists' Perceptions of Religion News

and Its Audience

Both recent research and anecdotal evidence suggest that religion news is undergoing a change as the public and the press become more aware of the relationship between religion and culture. Studies conducted during the 1950s and 1960s indicate that religion writers for daily newspapers shied away from stories about issues and problems within religious organizations or between religion and society.[1] But by the 1970s they had begun emphasizing longer, in-depth stories about matters of more than transitory local interest.2 Although a content analysis of selected papers shows that the actual religion news content can vary greatly from city to city depending on the interests and talents of the religion journalist, the news policy of the particular newspaper and the structural constraints under which it operates,[3] a survey indicates that religion writers at the largest newspapers attached greater importance to issue-oriented religion news than to any other content type.[4]

This apparent change in emphasis from local people- and event-oriented coverage to more issue-oriented coverage seems to parallel a change in readers' interests. Whereas early readership studies found that the public was most interested in local religion news about people and community events,[5] more recent evidence suggests that readers of religion news are about evenly divided between those who prefer the traditional people and event coverage and those who are more attracted by coverage of issues and beliefs.[6]

While recent studies suggest that readership of religion news is generally quite high,[7] and that many readers consider religion news very important,[8] one study found that most religion journalists have little idea who reads religion news or why they might read it,[9] while another group of researchers found that editors and reporters rank religion news 18th in importance out of 18 content areas.[10]

Although studies of religion news and its audience suggest that changes in religion news coverage have, indeed, occurred during the past 20 years, it is difficult to draw conclusions about religion journalism from these studies. All are based on investigation of only a single newspaper or a small group of purposefully selected newspapers. Moreover, findings from the surveys of journalists indicate that many may misperceive their audience and its interests. Therefore, they may be providing news that is unread because it doesn't address readers' wants and needs. Taken together, these studies raise questions about the religion news people get through their daily newspapers.

Therefore, this study surveyed a random sample of newspapers to determine the kinds of religion news coverage their religion journalists provide and to determine the kind of audience these journalists write for. If the apparent change in religion news coverage is a real and pervasive change, one would expect to find that the person responsible for religion news at most newspapers in all circulation categories would place more emphasis on news of doctrine and issues than on news of people and one-time events. One would also expect to find that these journalists generally recognize that readers are interested in both substantive issue-oriented news and in lighter religion news coverage.

Methodology

Data for this study come from a mail survey of a stratified random sample of 250 daily newspapers listed in the 1985 edition of Editor and Publisher. The sample design included equal numbers of very small (weekday circulation under 10,000), small (weekday circulation between 10,000 and 30,000), medium (weekday circulation between 30,000 and 50,000), large (weekday circulation between 50,000 and 100,000) and very large (weekday circulation over 100,000) newspapers.

For this study, a daily newspaper is one that publishes Monday through Friday and at least once during the weekend. 4

The eight-page questionnaire with self-addressed, stamped return envelope, was mailed on May 15, 1985, with two follow-up reminders sent during June. The last follow-up contained a duplicate questionnaire and stamped, return envelope.

Whenever possible, the questionnaire was addressed to the person listed as religion reporter or editor in Editor and Publisher. If no religion journalist was listed, the questionnaire was sent to the "religion reporter" along with a request that the questionnaire be completed by the person usually responsible for religion news at the newspaper.

Completed questionnaires were received from 141 newspapers for an overall response rate of 56 percent. The highest response rate came from the large newspapers (34 of 50, or 68%) while the lowest response rate (24 of 50, or 48%) came from the very small newspapers. Although the response rates associated with mail surveys always make interpreting the findings somewhat problematic, there seems little reason to believe the respondents are not generally representative. Response rates were similar for all geographic regions. Furthermore, both the "response" and "no response" groups included some newspapers known to the author to be committed to religion news coverage and others known to be relatively uninterested in religion news.

Questions used in this study include items designed to determine the kinds of religion news these journalists provide and to elicit information about these religion journalists' perceptions of the audience for the religion news they provide.

Religion News. In this category, respondents were asked to answer open-ended questions calling for a definition of religion news, an explanation of the mixtures of stories they look for, the news values they prefer in stories, and a list of the three most important stories they personally covered between May 1984 and May 1985 and the three most important stories about religion carried in their newspaper during that period but reported by someone else. The respondents were then asked

how important religion news about different geographic locations, religions and subject matter are in their newspapers.

Audience. Here, respondents were asked to describe in their own words the audience for the religion news in their newspapers and to answer fixed-response items asking how important reasons for reading religion news are to their readers.

Findings

Religion News

General Definition: Although religion news can be difficult to define, all but 13 of the 141 respondents to this survey managed to provide a working definition of the kinds of stories they consider religion news. The most common definition of religion news (38%) was an "institutional" definition which emphasizes religious organizations as the source of the news or as the institutions most affected by the news. But many respondents produced definitions that emphasize religious beliefs (19%), behavior undertaken by religious persons or religious organizations because of their beliefs (18%), or the news content (usually events or issues) of the stories (14%). Only two respondents suggested that religion news has anything to do with promoting particular religious beliefs or ethical values.

More than half the respondents from smaller newspapers provided an institutional definition, but only about one-fourth of the respondents from larger papers defined religion news in terms of the institutions that serve as the source or that are most affected by the news. In general, respondents from larger newspapers provided the most complex definitions of religion news. Respondents from smaller papers were more likely to provide a simple definition. They were also more likely to say that, in practice, religion news is whatever they find.

News Mixtures: These definitions of religion news, however, take on concrete meaning primarily through the mixture of stories and the news values religion journalists use to help them decide which stories to cover and which to ignore. Although approximately one-fourth of the respondents said there are few religion

stories available to them from which they can choose, most (83%) try to provide a particular mixture of religion news stories.

Among those respondents who do try to provide variety in religion news coverage, the preferred mixtures emphasize religious diversity (30%), content diversity (19%), geographic diversity (10%), and variety in writing style (news and features) (10%). A few respondents also mentioned trying to provide balanced coverage of the various sides to each issue involving religion.

The respondents from the smallest papers were less likely than other journalists to look for particular mixtures of stories. One-third of the respondents from the very small papers said they have to be content with whatever they find, but fewer than one in five of the respondents from other newspapers said they have little or no choice.

Among those respondents who said they can choose which stories to cover, religion journalists at smaller papers are most likely to decide on the basis of "religious parity." They mentioned treating all religions alike or providing coverage in rough proportion to a group's strength in the circulation area. Journalists at larger papers, however, emphasized "religious diversity." They mentioned ignoring groups that are not "making news" in order to make room for stories about a religion that is "different" or that had not been covered recently.

News Values: In addition to looking for a particular mixture of stories, about four-fifths of the respondents said they also look at the news value of stories in deciding which ones to cover. In response to an open-ended question which allowed multiple responses, the most commonly mentioned news values were importance (25%), a local angle (21%), novelty or newness (19%), impact (18%), timeliness (17%), and controversy (11%). Approximately one-fourth of the respondents also said they prefer stories that appeal to all readers instead of to just one particular religious group.

Respondents from smaller papers generally said they look for stories with a local angle, that are important to their local audience, and that involve important people more often than did respondents from larger papers. Respondents from larger papers more often mentioned looking for stories that are new, timely, involve controversy, appeal to all readers and have "real importance" -- not just local, transitory importance. This group of respondents also mentioned looking for stories that raise issues, provide "solid" information, or describe trends more often than did respondents from smaller newspapers.

Important Stories: Although about two-thirds of the respondents provided a list of the most important religion news stories they had covered in the last year and the most important religion stories covered by other journalists for their papers, the answers to these questions provided a composite list of only about 150 different stories and story types.

Stories mentioned most frequently as important and covered personally by the religion journalists include ones about a local person (22 mentions), about the Catholic bishops' statements on peace and economics (21 mentions), a local congregation (18 mentions), the sanctuary movement in the United States (16 mentions), the Southern Baptist national convention (12 mentions) and a local event (12 mentions).

Those stories mentioned most frequently as important but covered by another reporter or picked up from the wire services include ones involving the role of religion in the 1984 presidential election (23 mentions), the Pope (19 mentions), the Catholic bishops' statements on peace and economics (17 mentions) and various First Amendment issues (13 mentions).

An examination of the lists of important stories indicates that the issue-oriented stories are primarily the agenda of religion journalists at the larger newspapers who reported being most attracted to issue-oriented stories of real importance to a general audience. Consistent with their preferences in news values,

the respondents from the smaller newspapers attached greater importance to stories they had written about local events, people and congregations.

However, the lists of important stories written by other journalists suggest that all religion journalists recognize the significance of certain issues and situations involving religion. There was no real difference between respondents from larger and smaller newspapers in their mentions of the top stories written by other journalists. However, there were some differences in other important stories they added to that list. Respondents from larger newspapers mentioned stories about membership trends and about the treatment of homosexuality by religions more often than did respondents from smaller newspapers. Respondents from smaller newspapers included stories about a shortage of Catholic priests and teaching nuns and about religious conflict involving Sikhs in India more often than did journalists from larger newspapers. The respondents from the smaller papers also added to their list of important stories news-feature oriented ones about religious holidays and about archaeological findings relating to religion.

Story Subjects: Consistent with answers to the open-ended questions, responses to questions about how much coverage their newspapers give to particular kinds of news indicate that at most papers religion news is primarily local news. Among all respondents, 86 percent said they give local news a lot of coverage, but only 13 percent said they give similar attention to national news. Only 3 percent reported giving a lot of coverage to foreign news. (Table 1)

More than one-third of the respondents also said they give a lot of coverage to news of Roman Catholics and Mainline and Evangelical Protestants. Approximately one-fourth reported giving heavy coverage to news about Jews, but other religious groups apparently get little coverage at most newspapers except on those occasions when they are "making news." (Table 1)

Approximately half the respondents said they give heavy coverage to news about people, events and missionary activity, while about one-fifth reported giving

a lot of coverage to news about long-term programs and projects, various kinds of issues and trends. Other kinds of religion news are apparently not provided regularly at most newspapers. (Table 1)

In general, there was no significant difference between smaller and larger newspapers in the amount of attention devoted to local news, but larger newspapers were slightly more likely than smaller ones to devote attention to national news (Kendall's Tau C = .16, p = 00) and foreign news (Kendall's Tau C = .11, p = .04).

Respondents from larger newspapers also reported giving more attention to news about Roman Catholics (Kendall's Tau B = .30, p = .00), than did their counterparts at smaller newspapers. Although differences for other religions were extremely weak, respondents for larger newspapers reported giving slightly more attention to Mainline and Evangelical Protestants and to sects and cults than did respondents from smaller newspapers. On the other hand, the respondents from smaller newspapers reported slightly higher attention to news from Holiness and Other Christian churches.

Consistent with their answers to the open-ended questions, respondents from the larger newspapers reported giving more news coverage to stories about doctrine (Kendall's Tau C = .25, p = .00), religious issues (Kendall's Tau C = .23, p = .00) and other issues (Kendall's Tau C = .29, p = .00) and to reviews (Kendall's Tau C = .22, p = .00) than did respondents from the smaller newspapers. Although associations between size of newspaper and attention to other content types were extremely weak, the data indicate respondents from smaller newspapers gave slightly more coverage to news of events and missions and to personal columns while respondents from larger newspapers gave slightly more attention to news about continuing projects, social ministry and people.

The Audience for Religion News

General Characteristics: In response to an open-ended question which allowed for multiple responses, the overwhelming majority of respondents (71%) said most

of their readers come from the ranks of the clergy or church members. However, approximately one-fourth of the respondents said "everybody" or "all kinds of people" read religion news and a similar number said their readers are primarily attracted by the content of particular stories or have a general interest in news and in issues. Another 16 percent said their readers have a general interest in religion but are not necessarily church members. Approximately 10 percent also mentioned that people who are looking for a church or for a particular kind of event read religion news. A similar number said politicians or members of special interest or pressure groups monitor religion news regularly. Few respondents provided demographic information about their readers, but those who did could not agree on the important characteristics of religion news readers.

Respondents from larger newspapers were more likely than respondents from smaller ones to say their readership is not limited to church members, but they were also more likely to mention members of a specific religious group as being among their regular readers. They were also more likely than respondents from smaller newspapers to say that their readership includes politicians, members of special interest groups, and individuals with a higher than average level of education. Religion journalists from smaller newspapers mentioned the elderly, shut-ins and people looking for a church or for a particular kind of event more often than did the respondents from larger newspapers.

Reasons for Reading Religion News: In response to a series of questions asking how important various reasons for reading religion news are to their readers, more than two-thirds of the respondents said that reading religion news to keep tabs on what is going on is very important to their audience, but only about one-third said hearing what others have to say and learning about one's own and about other religions are very important reasons for reading religion news. Between 10 and 20 percent of the respondents indicated that being entertained, getting spiritual guidance or learning about issues are very important to their audience.

Even fewer attached importance to reading religion news to avoid being lonely, to know oneself better, to relax or to kill time. (Table 2)

Associations between the size of newspaper and the respondent's perception of reasons people might read religion news were extremely weak. Of these, the strongest were a slight tendency for religion journalists at larger papers to attach importance to reading religion news for entertainment (Kendall's Tau C = .10, p = .09) and for respondents from smaller newspapers to report that their audience reads for spiritual guidance (Kendall's Tau C = -.12, p = .05). In addition, respondents from larger newspapers reported slightly more interest on the part of their readers in religion news as a way to keep tabs on what is going on, hear what others have to say, learn to know oneself better, learn about one's own and other people's religions, and also to kill time. Respondents from smaller newspapers suggested that their readers were slightly more interested in reading to relax and to avoid loneliness, but rather surprisingly, also to learn about religious and other issues.

Conclusion

Data from this study indicate that religion journalists' perceptions of religion news and of their audiences' interests in reading religion news may have changed over time, but the actual practice of religion news coverage may not have changed much in the last quarter century. Most religion journalists did report looking for a mixture of stories about events and issues or news and features. They also reported being most attracted to stories about issues, conflicts and trends that would be important to a broad segment of the general public instead of being interesting merely to one segment of the religious community. They also included many issue-oriented stories on their lists of the top religion stories carried in their newspapers but written by some other journalist.

However, the reports of their own work suggest that little has changed in religion news coverage. Approximately half of the most important stories these

journalists said they had covered were about local people, congregations and events. Furthermore, far more respondents reported their newspapers devote a lot of coverage to stories of people and events than reported similar attention to stories of issues, doctrine and practices or of trends.

In general, these patterns hold for newspapers in all circulation categories. However, there appears to be a rather sharp dichotomy between standard practices in religion news coverage at smaller papers and at the larger ones. At the smaller papers, the desire to provide a mixture of stories of real importance about both issues and events appears to be wishful thinking. These respondents account for most of the stories about people, congregations and events that appeared on the list of important stories. Many of them are also the ones who wrote on their questionnaires, "In practice, religion news is often whatever I find." In sharp contrast, most respondents from the larger newspapers included only trend or issue-oriented stories on their lists of important stories and provided rather precise information on the kinds of stories they look for and the kinds they reject to make way for items they consider more newsworthy.

Furthermore, answers to the specific questions about news coverage suggest that the smaller papers are slightly more likely than the larger ones to fill up the religion news space with stories about events or with religion-oriented columns. Larger newspapers, however, are much more likely than small ones to provide stories about issues, trends and doctrine. They are also more likely to review movies, books, music and art shows with religious themes.

As striking as these reported differences in news coverage are, they do not seem to be the result of different perceptions of the kinds of religion news that readers need and want. Journalists reported looking for both hard news and features or for stories about events and issues. This suggests they recognize that readers want, and perhaps need, both kinds of stories. Furthermore, most gave rather similar descriptions of their readers and attached similar importance to various

reasons why people might read religion news. Respondents from both the larger and the smaller newspapers seemed to recognize that people probably read religion news as a leisure-time activity and also as part of a more serious attempt to understand their world.

Because nothing in these respondents' answers to questions about their readers suggest these journalists believe the old "small-town localite/big-city cosmopolite" stereotype,[11] differences in religion news coverage between smaller and larger newspapers cannot be attributed to differences in gatekeepers' perceptions of what small-town and big-city audiences need and want. Instead, the differences almost certainly stem from differences in the communities in which these journalists work and the resources they have available to them.

Almost without exception, daily newspapers in the United States are local newspapers. Therefore, almost all concentrate more resources into covering local news than national or foreign news. Thus, size of community imposes some limits on the number and kind of available stories.

Newspapers in all circulation categories devote more space to local religion news than to either national or foreign news, but larger newspapers do tend to provide more national and foreign coverage than do the smaller ones. Responses to the open-ended survey questions and the comments respondents wrote on their questionnaires suggest this occurs both because sources for national and foreign news are more available in the big cities than in small towns and because small-town journalists recognize their readers have other sources available to them for national and foreign news. However, only the local paper can or will cover the small-town local news.

Similarly, the differences in attention devoted to various religious traditions seem related to differences in demographic characteristics of small towns as compared to larger cities. The data show that larger newspapers devote somewhat more attention to news about Roman Catholicism, Judaism and other non-Christian

religions than do smaller newspapers. In general, members of these religions are more likely to live in big cities than in small towns. As one respondent from a smaller newspaper commented, "We concentrate on local news and there aren't any Jews in our town." However, these religions have headquarters in larger cities where they are readily available and often highly visible local news sources.

In contrast, smaller newspapers are somewhat more likely to cover Holiness and Other Christian religions more heavily than do larger newspapers. Not only are these churches comparatively more numerous in small towns than in larger cities, but they are more easily covered in a smaller setting. In a small town the religion journalist can know all the clergy in town and find them whether or not they devote full-time to their religious calling. They can also know at least a few members of each congregation. Therefore, it is easier for the small-town journalist to monitor these groups and find appropriate news sources than it is for the journalist in a big city to whom these groups are often invisible because of their lack of a centralized organization and frequent dependence on part-time clergy.

While differences in attention to religious faiths are probably best explained by community demographics, the differences in actual story content are probably a reflection of the resources available to a particular newspaper. Because of staffing limitations, religion reporting is generally a part-time assignment at smaller newspapers.[12] Therefore, these journalists must limit themselves to the quickly written people- and event-oriented stories if they are to fill the necessary space each week. However, religion journalists at larger newspapers generally devote full time to the religion beat. Furthermore, for them many more and varied sources are only a local phone call away. Therefore, they have greater ability than their small-town counterparts to develop and write the more complex stories about doctrine and practice, issues and trends. At the same time, it may be more difficult for them to cope with the pure local event story. Because there are so many such stories available in a big city, the tendency seems to be to rule out

many as "not newsworthy," while combining others into broader stories about "situations" or "trends."

This study suggests that the reported changes in religion news coverage may be more a change in the awareness of the importance of religion and in the possibilities for serious religion news coverage than a change in actual coverage. While some change almost certainly has occurred, that change seems limited primarily to the larger newspapers.

The responses to this survey of religion journalists indicate that those who work at smaller newspapers recognize the importance and possibilities of religion news. They also seem to recognize that their readers may want and need diverse coverage that includes both local events and serious attention to issues. But they appear limited in their ability to cover religion news the way many would like to cover it because of the realities of their working conditions. They can only devote part-time to religion news; they must cover their town, but it has a limited number of religious institutions and appropriate sources. Therefore, they feel they must concentrate on local people, congregations and events, both because that is what much small-town local news is about and because those stories are easiest to cover.

At these smaller papers, change may only occur if the journalists are given more time to develop substantive stories or if they are given the resources to acquire stories from the wire services or specialized religion news services and syndicates which can be run along with the religion journalists' own local-angle side bar.

Footnotes

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in Non-Metropolitan Communities," Newspaper Research Journal, 1(4):18-24. July 1980.

8. Shaw and Riffe, loc. cit.

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Table 1

Coverage Devoted to Types of Religion News in Daily Newspapers

	Amount of Coverage			
New Focus	A Lot	Some	Not Much	None
Geographic Focus				
Local (n-140)	85.7%	8.6%	5.7%	---
National (n-139)	12.9%	67.6%	16.5%	2.9%
Foreign (n=139)	2.9%	27.3%	56.1%	13.7%
Religious Focus				
Catholic (n=136)	44.9%	52.9%	2.2%	---
Mainline Protestant (n=136)	44.1%	53.7%	2.2%	---
Evangelical Protestant (n=136)	36.0%	55.1%	8.8%	---
Holiness Protestant (n=136)	14.8%	53.3%	31.1%	0.7%
Other Christian (n=133)	15.8%	60.9%	21.1%	2.3%
Jewish (n=133)	27.1%	50.4%	21.1%	1.5%
Sects & Cults (n=133)	6.0%	43.6%	41.4%	9.0%
Other Non-christian (n=134)	3.0%	44.8%	38.1%	14.2%
Content Focus				
Doctrine (n=135)	14.1%	60.0%	22.2%	3.7%
Events (n=140)	35.7%	37.1%	7.1%	---
On-going Projects (n=134)	22.4%	62.7%	12.7%	2.2%
Missions (n=134)	17.2%	52.2%	28.4%	2.2%
Social Ministry (n=134)	44.8%	44.0%	9.7%	1.5%
People (n=134)	62.7%	31.3%	6.0%	---
Religious Issues (n=139)	25.2%	52.5%	18.0%	4.3%
Other Issues (n=139)	17.3%	55.4%	23.7%	3.6%
Trends (n=136)	21.3%	55.9%	19.1%	3.7%
Columns (n=133)	18.0%	19.5%	18.8%	43.6%
Reviews (n=135)	1.5%	14.8%	38.5%	45.2%

Table 2

Religion Journalists' Perceptions of Reasons People Read Religion News

Reason	Very	Somewhat	Not Very	Not at All
Keep tabs (n=133)	65.4%	32.3%	2.3%	---
Hear others (n=132)	38.6%	51.5%	9.1%	.8%
Be entertained (n=132)	12.1%	43.2%	37.1%	7.6%
Relax (n=131)	5.3%	24.4%	51.1%	19.1%
Kill time (n=130)	.8%	19.2%	51.5%	28.5%
Avoid loneliness (n=130)	5.4%	24.6%	41.5%	28.5%
Know oneself better (n=130)	9.2%	36.9%	42.3%	11.5%
Get spiritual guidance (n=131)	11.5%	43.5%	32.8%	12.2%
Learn about religious issues (n=130)	18.5%	60.0%	19.2%	2.3%
Learn about other issues (n=130)	16.2%	51.5%	27.7%	4.6%
Learn about one's own religion (n=130)	30.0%	45.4%	20.0%	4.6%
Learn about other people's religion (n=131)	35.9%	56.5%	6.1%	1.5%